

Social Services Provision and Community Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

The importance of social services provision has been ignored in practice for long by successive governments and the private sector in Nigeria. The resultant effect has been severely felt by her populace who are at the receiving end. It is widely acknowledged that for real development to take place, there are several conditions that have to be on ground. One of these numerous conditions is the provision of vital social services. Regrettably, this aspect of the development process has not been given the adequate and deserved attention it requires. Thus, all the efforts put to develop our immediate rural communities and improve the welfare of the populace have either been wasted or truncated. To ensure the development of rural communities in Nigeria, concerted efforts by government and private sector must be made to provide social infrastructure that will provide enabling environment for other aspects of development to take place. This way, the development and wellbeing of the rural populace will be ensured.

Key words: Social services, community development, social infrastructure and rural.

INTRODUCTION

Generally put, social services are commonly regarded as public services or social infrastructures which are basic to the welfare of individuals and communities provided by government or private sector. The definition of social services varies depending on the perception of what should be included as a form of social service. According to Joanne Godwin in the Electronic Encyclopedia of Chicago, 'social service (or social welfare) refers to a variety of programmes made available by public or private agencies to individuals and families who need special assistance.'

Social services according to www.businessdictionary.com are;

Benefits and facilities such as education, food subsidies, health care, and subsidized housing provided by a government to improve the life and living conditions of the children, disabled, the elderly, and the poor in the national community.

Further explanation about the concept of social services as provided by www.gov.je/Health/Social/Services/pages/About.aspx is that;

Social service helps people who are experiencing difficulties in their daily lives to assess and understand the problems they face, and to find solutions. The intention is to help them live more successfully and independently, or if this is not possible, to be cared for in a setting that meets their needs.

For us, social services embrace much more than welfare services provided for people with special needs and individuals that need assistance. This position is justified by our understanding that all humans the world over, require improved welfare at any time and need service provision that will cater for their welfare needs as individuals and as a community. Collectivities of people need to understand the challenges or problems they face in life and be able to seek solutions that will address these numerous challenges that they encounter in their daily struggle for improved living. Moreover, social services are very essential if people will actualize their dreams and goals for a better life which is central to most government concerns. With emphasis on human-centred development, the measure of our development ceases to be only that of economic prosperity, but that of 'strengthening human capabilities and broadening choices to enable people to live lives that they have reason to value', (Weiss, Carayannis, Emmerij and Jolly, 2005).

Development, as a social science concept, is a complex term which understanding poses some challenge. The reason is not farfetched. First, as typical of many social science terminologies, 'development' is freely used in everyday conversation. This makes divorcing its meaning in academic circles from its meaning in public sphere a bit difficult. Second, there is hardly a generally acceptable definition among scholars owing to the fact that the concept is surrounded with polemics arising from peculiar intellectual backgrounds and persuasions of users. Scholars from different discipline backgrounds have provided several definitions or explanations of development

which vary from each other (Anikpo, 1996). Sen (1999) sees development as ‘an integrated process of expansion of substantive freedoms that connect with one another’. By implication, development entails different kinds of freedoms such as freedom from poverty, inequality, etc. Sen is also of the opinion that development has to be more concerned with enhancing the lives we lead and the freedoms we enjoy. In this paper, development is considered to mean the continual success of all efforts made by man to address the challenges he encounters in his environment and in the course of his daily living in order to achieve an optimum state of wellbeing. This explanation is believed to, at least in principle, capture the desire and objectives of societies – underdeveloped, developing and developed. As universal as this phenomenon is, there are also variations in terms of the levels reached by various communities, states or nations.

One of the ways in which development is analyzed is by distilling it and considering the key components that underline it. An integral aspect of development discourse is community development. According to the United Nations (in Okodudu, 1998), community development is defined as:

The process by which the efforts of a people are united with that of government authorities to improve the social, economic, socio-cultural conditions of the communities to integrate these communities into the life of the nation and to enable them contribute fully to national progress.

The need for community development cannot be overstated. Handelman (2009) is of the view that ‘the worst aspects of political and economic underdevelopment prevail’ in the rural communities of most third world nations. Rural communities in Nigeria are those basically agrarian in nature and lack most features of modern societies. Handelman’s view is typical of Nigeria’s rural communities. This underscores the need to view the development of our rural communities with a greater degree of seriousness. In the distribution of social services such as schools, health care, housing, electricity, safe water, adequate shelter, environmental and livelihood concerns, the rural communities lag behind, in comparison with urban centres. The social condition of the rural populace in Nigeria has long been ignored and relegated in preference to the urban environment and population. The argument advanced in some quarters is that social exclusion of rural areas in terms of provision of basic social services is not an exclusive experience of rural areas; urban centres also face some degree of neglect and exclusion. Given that exclusion is not peculiar to rural areas, they face a much greater degree of exclusion than urban areas (Giddens, 2006). In Nigeria, the reality on ground is that both rural and urban sectors cry for urgent intervention government and non government intervention, but clearly, urban sector has fared far better than rural sector (National Bureau of Statistics, 2009). Thus, the rural population belongs to the vulnerable category as they are mostly shortchanged when it comes to provision of social services.

The State of Social Service Provision in Nigeria’s Rural Communities

Social service provision has not been met in rural societies of most developing economies of the world, especially in Africa. Adding voice in support of this assertion, Kofi Annan (in Weisse Carayannis, Emmerij, and Jolly, 2005) is of the opinion that;

We tended to take for granted some of the essential services, like health, education, infrastructure, and others. But now, of course, everybody realizes that without good health, without basic education, and others, you are not going to move forward.

Also, UNDP’s Zambia Human Development Report (ZHDR) of 1988 revealed that the provision, access and use of basic social services, were challenges confronting Zambia and many other African. The report particularly highlighted the very deplorable state of education in Zambia. Most Zambians, at least 55% of Zambians living in rural areas and 27% of urban dwellers, were largely excluded from qualitative education. The Zambian case is not different from that of Nigeria which has for long battled with numerous challenges on the path to her development. In spite of the appreciation and realization of the imperative of provision of social services in local communities and the defining locus community development occupies in development process, its implementation is largely an issue of unending dialogue in Nigeria rather than progress. The usual disposition of political leadership, with exception of very few of them who have shown considerable commitment to ameliorating the living conditions of rural communities, is that of lip service. Provision of basic social service in Nigeria by the government is at the brink of collapse. This is more glaring in Nigeria’s rural communities where majority of her populace dwell.

In Nigeria, the provision of social services or social infrastructure has been the responsibility of government and the private sector. However, both sectors have failed in this responsibility. In addition to grappling with this responsibility, government has had to contend with other problems such as terrorism (Boko Haram), militancy, environmental challenges, ailing oil economy and endemic corruption. All these seem to have diverted the attention of the Nigerian government from addressing the need for essential social services for her citizens. Iloh

and Bahir (2013) are of the view that Nigeria has weak supported social welfare system for her citizens. The multinational oil companies which owe provision of some social services as part of their corporate social responsibilities to their host communities have also failed in this respect. They have thus turned blind eye to the poor living conditions of their host communities. The history of Nigeria's development teaches that the rural areas have consistently been marginalized with little effort made to address the multiple challenges that face them. The lopsidedness of Nigeria's development efforts in favour of urban areas, where the political class and the affluent reside is traceable to her colonial history. Unfortunately, this imbalance has taken long to be properly addressed and corrected by the political class. Many reasons have been adduced for this state of affairs. However, it becomes worrisome to note that despite the much touted efforts of private organizations and government, the state of our rural areas has remained largely unaltered. Realizing further, that rural areas of Nigeria are the seats of her agricultural production which sustains the entire country, one further ponders why the necessary conditions that will ensure the strengthening of human capabilities therein and the pursuit of development goals will not be vigorous.

Many factors have been pointed out as the reasons behind lack of social services provision in rural communities in Nigeria. Prominent among them are; corruption, (Abegunde, 2014, Adegbam and Nofiu, 2013, Agba, Akwara, and Idub, 2013) and mismanagement of funds among leaders, poor maintenance culture and poor utilization of taxes to provide social services for the people (Abegunde, 2014). Added to this list are undue political interference in local governance and diversion of fund meant for provision of services in local government areas, (Agba Akwara, and Idub, 2013) and acceptance of International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank's (WB) conditionality that government should withdraw from the provision of social services for their people in order to benefit from their loan aids (Abegunde, 2014).

Following the failure of government to provide the needed social services for the rural communities, as seen in the failures of agencies like Directorate for Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI), Nigeria Electric Power Authority (NEPA) now Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN) (privatized) and Nigeria Railway Corporation of Nigeria (NRCN) – which has experienced some revamping by current political leadership in the country since it became moribund many years ago. Adegbam and Nofiu (2013) state that 'the inability of the state to tackle the problem of social service delivery in different parts of the nation led to the adoption of self-governing system by the people through alternative effort and collective action.' Since after the Nigeria civil war, most communities have resorted to self-help projects as a strategy to ensure the provision of social services to themselves. Communities now imbibe the philosophy of having community-financed projects; sourcing and financing electricity installations, maintaining and, and in some cases, building public schools, health centres, water project, and road construction and repairs. To cater for the educational needs of indigent members, scholarship schemes are also instituted. Iloh and Bahir (2013) state that people now resort to the extended families in their old age for welfare services. All these are pointers that the government has failed in its duty towards her citizenry. This failure on the part of government is even more worrisome when one considers that one of the major reasons for creating the local government administration is to ensure that dividends of democracy gets down to the grassroots. However, it is common knowledge that the local governments have performed poorly in carrying along the rural people, let alone attend to their needs and aspirations. Evidence abounds about the inability of local governments to meet the demands of social facilities. This may not be unconnected to fusion of local government fund and state government fund leaving the local government's appropriation at the discretion of the state government represented by the Governor, and lack of autonomy for local authorities. State Governors have consistently commandeered local government fund and merely released only barely sufficient fund to cover the wage bills of local governments to them. This is added to such familiar problems as leadership insensitivity and lack of development focus. Active community participation in local governance is almost non-existent. People hardly get the opportunity to make any input with respect to the areas of their critical needs. The end result of this state of affairs is intense suffering that cannot be classified in such communities. Thus, lack of social services interferes with the wellbeing of the people.

Social Services Provision: A Sine Qua Non for Development

Going by the various indicators of development, especially as provided by the United Nations' Human Development Index (HDI), issues relating to health, education, housing and provision of basic infrastructure are central. These constitute the social services that ought to be provided and sustained for any further development to take place. According to Sen Amartya in Weiss Carayannis, Emmerij, and Jolly (2005); 'the HDI is now a widely quoted and influential indicator that provides a yardstick against which the impact of government policies and initiatives can be measured.' The provision of these basic social services also ensures that more emphasis is placed on the wellbeing of people more than on structures. This will ensure social progress as people live better and participate in the development process due to strengthened capabilities engendered by provision of social

services. Abegunde (2014) captures the essence of social service provision by indicating that “basic infrastructure is crucial to the provision and sustenance of public welfare as well as the enhancement of growth and development of any society.” He states further that “the availability of adequate and functional infrastructure encourages productive enterprise, employment generation and the capacity of the economy to be self-sustained, attract and retain foreign direct investment (FDI).” Following from these statements, one can infer like Iloh and Bahir (2013) that, an economy that lacks adequate social infrastructure “can hardly improve the life of the citizenry”, let alone further the development of the community. Provision of social infrastructure is a necessity that must be addressed for man to achieve real freedom from poverty and the inequalities of life. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Report (2000) states that “inequality in access to basic infrastructure and services are key drivers of poverty, vulnerability and inequality in Nigeria.” This situation is more glaring in Nigeria’s rural communities.

CONCLUSION

To improve the quality of life of rural communities and enhance their capacity for development, provision of social services must be ensured through the active participation of government agencies and the community people. The participation of rural communities will ensure that what they actually need is what they get. This will eliminate duplication, wastage of lean development resources and ensure the communities’ active involvement in the maintenance and protection of these social services when provided. There must be equity on the side of government in the provision of and access to social services provided, by eliminating any form of social barriers that can hinder some groups of people from accessing the same. Corruption and diversion of development fund into private pockets must be decisively handled, as this robs rural communities of needed development finance. This will ensure social justice which our democracy has vowed to achieve and maintain. Also, it is evidential that Nigerian government’s policy direction since return to democratic rule in 1999 is largely influenced by free market policy prescriptions which compel government to privatize the provision of basic social infrastructures like health, education, electricity and security, hence there is need to regulate this market economy so that the interests of rural people will be protected and the desired development in those areas fast-tracked. The task to ensure better life for rural dwellers is, admittedly, a difficult one, but it is task that must be done. The import of this is that a society cannot lay claim to being developed without the spread of social infrastructures to constituent communities.

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